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Haiti: Cemeteries, tombs, graves and the dead

Tombs and cemeteries are a prominent feature of the Haitian landscape, as well as of the *vodou* related belief system. The cemetery is the place where powerful spirits reside: Baron Samedi and *Gede* spirits. They are in charge of the dead and they are involved in magic but also in curing and fertility. Also, they parody the behavior of the upper class.

There are urban, public cemeteries, as in Port-au-Prince ([PH360](#), [361](#), [362](#), [363](#)). Some wealthy families have mausoleums where the dead are entombed after a Catholic funeral Mass. There are tombs and grave stones of individuals and some more modest graves as well. The site is visible from the surrounding hills ([PH009](#)). Another, more elaborate cemetery was encountered on a roadside hill in the southern section of the country, on a trip to Les Cayes. This cemetery was particularly striking in its appearance ([PH846](#), [847](#), [848](#), [849](#), [850](#)).

By contrast, rural tombs are often located on family property and those of family founders have become sites of pilgrimages. A set of old masonry tombs was seen in the market place of Fonds des Nègres ([PH854](#), [855](#), [856](#), [857](#)). These may be related to founders and their principal function appears to be protection of the market place.

Furcy has a very old and almost deserted looking cemetery. It consists of old masonry tombs, but also has some newer ones and fresh wooden crosses ([EH497](#), [498](#), [499](#), [500](#), [501](#), [502](#), [503](#)). It is located on a hillcrest overlooking valleys to the south.

Landowning families generally have their own cemeteries on their land.

During the time spent in Furcy there were numerous deaths, burials and related rituals. A death is announced by keening (*rèl*), a repeated, piercing cry that can be heard over considerable distances.

A funeral: In May 1948 a young woman died of tuberculosis. Many people attended the funeral and brought small gifts. There were more than 100 in attendance, some of whom had come the night before. The crowd included young girls but no children. The funeral was preceded by three wakes. Some people expected to receive some items of the dead girl's belongings, but because of the TB, her clothes had to be burned according to government rules. Her plate and cup, however, were put into her coffin. Her parents did not attend the burial in accordance with the traditional rule that the older do not follow the younger to their graves. Nor do parents wear black (mourning clothes) for their children.

The young woman was buried at a small family cemetery at a lower site, down a steep mountain path. The crowd prayed and sang intermittently. There were several graves with wooden crosses, but no tombs of the sort found in the hill top cemetery. It was a Catholic burial, led by the Commandant, who is also the sacristan. He replaces the priest from Kenscoff, who comes to Furcy once a year, to conduct a mission. He is literate and read Catholic prayers. A painted wooden cross will be placed on the grave at a later time. To have such a large, well-attended funeral is desired as a sign of respect from many people. After the funeral, the family and its helpers started to cook corn and rice to feed the crowd. Women with baskets full of bottles were selling *clairin* (raw rum), men gambled, playing *zo* (bones).

The death and burial of this young woman brought up various related subjects of conversation:

People who have money have tombs built for them in their lifetime and such tombs are tended by family members with offerings of food, flowers and also of *vodou*-related rituals. It is widely believed that a neglected grave site exposes the dead to the risk of being turned into a *zombi* by a sorcerer who knows the dead person's name.

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There is great fear both of *zombis* and of being turned into a *zombi*. Attempts are made to protect the dead. For example, the girl's brother claimed that after she had died she was

given rat poison so that “the body would stay in the ground and rot.” It is also believed by some that, after a week, the dead person would return and take the soul (i.e. the immaterial part) of the things she left behind. Also, dead people can return in dreams (From field notes).

Example: In Furcy, a group of people—three men and ten women—passed along the road singing. The women, in white, carried baskets on their heads and one of the men carried a small wooden cross covered with a white cloth to deposit at the cemetery. This was for the common-law husband of one of the women. He had died while away at work and his employers were suspected of having killed him by magic. The woman did not know where he was buried, but depositing the cross for him would keep him from “walking the roads,” to ensure him a peaceful death. (See [PH502](#) for a cross of this type. The tomb against which it is placed is unrelated to the particular case).

Reference:

Bourguignon, Erika. “The Persistence of Folk Belief: Some Notes on Cannibalism and Zombis in Haiti.” *Journal of American Folklore* 72: 36-46.